

ISLAM IN BRITAIN, a short summary

Daughters of Charity - British Province

1. Introduction

There has been a Muslim presence in Britain, for at least 300 years. Over the last 150 years or so the growth of centres of organized Islam and the building up of Muslim communities has taken place. The first Mosque was built in Woking, near London, in 1809. It is thought that by 1924 about 30 people regularly attended prayers at the Woking Mosque. There were more than 1000 British Muslims around the country, and 10,000 Muslims from overseas.

Now, three-quarters of a century later, the estimated number of Muslims in Britain is about one and a half million. By 1966 there were 18 Mosques registered and by 1985, 338. The most well-known Mosque is the Central Mosque at Regents Park. Land for this was donated by King George VI in exchange for a site in Cairo for an Anglican Cathedral.

In Britain there are Muslims from many countries of Africa, the Middle East and Asia, with the greater percentage from the latter continent. Muslim Centres and communities are established in various cities throughout Britain, especially in London, Bradford and Birmingham. About a quarter of the children attending primary schools in Birmingham are Muslim. The Muslim communities tend to be concentrated in certain areas, so in some schools the majority of the children are Muslim. A lot of effort is made by the schools and by the authorities, to cater for Muslim families and their children.

The Muslim presence in Britain has increased rapidly over the last 30 years, and it is continuing to grow. It is one of the aspects of Britain as a multicultural society, and it provides enrichment and challenges.

2. Interfaith Dialogue in Britain

In response to the declarations made in the Documents of the Vatican Council, and in accordance with its decisions, the Bishops Conference of the Catholic Church in England and Wales set up a Committee for other faiths. This Committee aims to promote dialogue with the many followers of the different faiths present in Britain, based on respect and a better understanding of the teaching and practices of these faiths.

As Muslims are in the majority, and there is with them a special relationship as children of Abraham, a subcommittee has recently been set up.

This committee is to focus more specifically on dialogue with Muslims and also has a pastoral role.

Each diocese now has an interfaith coordinator and there are in various places, and operating at different levels, interfaith networks. These networks work with Christians of all denominations to bring about better understanding of other faiths, and to discover ways of engaging in dialogue, and of working together, for example, in the promotion of peace and the settlement of moral issues.

My personal experience is from involvement with the Network in Birmingham, and Westminster Interfaith, the aims of which are:

1. to respond to the Church's teaching;
2. to promote understanding between faiths; and
3. to help Christians deepen their own faith by promoting greater awareness of other faiths through dialogue, prayer and action.

One of the most impressive events organized by Westminster Interfaith is the annual Peace Pilgrimage Walk. Two hundred or so people take part in this. Various places of worship are visited in different parts of London, and as we are welcomed in each mosque, church, synagogue, temple and other places of prayer, there is a great sense of the presence of the Befriending Spirit.

Cardinal Basil Hume was the Patron of Westminster Interfaith, and shortly before he died he sent a message to the Peace Pilgrimage which took place in June in which he said he would be with us in spirit.

3. Pastoral Engagements

Firstly I want to mention interfaith networking as one of the forms of pastoral engagement. Through working with others, lay people, religious and priests, the sphere of influence is widened and opportunities for various pastoral ministries opened up. In some cases we can become more actively involved while others play an important supportive role. Not only does it allow occasions for dialogue with Muslims, it can also be a platform for tackling moral and justice issues together. At the Birmingham Council of Faiths meeting in March a Muslim, speaking as chairperson of the Council and as representative of the Muslim community, promised support for the Jubilee 2000 campaign for the cancellation of third world debt.

I consider awareness-/consciousness-raising as another very important aspect of pastoral engagement. It can help to dispel fears and prejudices, and evoke interest and respect, thus helping to bring about the right climate, and pave the way for more practical involvement.

For many Muslims in Britain unfamiliarity with the English language is a cause of difficulty and therefore a call for pastoral engagement. For two years, while placed in London, I helped in the teaching of English to children of Muslim families from Bangladesh, Somalia and Albania. At present one of our sisters is a member of a team of volunteer teachers of English as a second language, ESOL, at a college in Hendon, North London. She says how respectful and interested are the Muslim adult student and writes: "The Volunteers ESOL that I belong to is for immigrants. The College promotes their welfare in all sorts of ways. It isn't just a question of teaching. I myself found I had to liaise with the Social Service, hospitals, etc. and write notes to postmen, butchers, doctors, housing committees etc. It's a great work".

Through our hostel work, day centres and other ministries, some of which are specifically refugee orientated, our sisters are in contact with Muslims. Although the majority of the children of Muslims families attend state schools, there are in some Catholic schools a number of Muslim pupils. A sister who for a short time had contact with a school in Peterborough, speaks of how the Muslim children there are catered for, and how provision of a special prayer space is made for them during the time of Ramadan.

In Sheffield one of our sisters is the director of a furniture distribution centre. This is a St. Vincent de Paul Society project for the support of families and others who are going through difficulties and cannot afford to furnish their homes. Sister has contact with, and is at the service of, the Muslim families who come for help.

Having spoken of collaboration with the SVP, I want to mention here, how the Annual General Meeting of the Society held in Bradford last year a Muslim was invited to address the assembly for the first time.

My understanding of the grassroots level of pastoral engagement is that it is based on the willingness to be open, and the readiness to relate to, to befriend and to assist, and to receive assistance; even when such encounters are fleeting, and of themselves seem unimportant. Opportunities for this kind of pastoral engagement are numerous. Muslim are among our fellow travellers when we journey. They are our neighbours, our shopkeepers and in some instances our colleagues, e. g., in hospital chaplaincy work. A sister living in London writes: "Our corner shop is run by a Muslim family and I frequently chat with the members of this family when I visit their shop. I find that they are very interested in our religion and are most respectful."

Our Father Director speaks of his occasional contact with Muslims and of how he is inspired by their prayerfulness.

My hope and prayer is that this session will help us and all of our

Vincentian family to grow in openness and understanding love for our Muslim brothers and sisters, and that as this happens, we will be more clearly recognized as children of our Father in heaven.